

Private W H Cooke©
Regimental number: 3463
3rd Battalion, British West Indies Regiment

born: unknown - died: 10 July 1917

Private W H Cooke served with the 3rd Battalion of the British West Indies Regiment.¹ The BWIR was formed in 1915 and about 15,000 Caribbean men volunteered, through patriotism and loyalty to the British Empire, to serve in the regiment.² The largest contingent—over 10,000 men—came from Jamaica.

However, the British War Office was not keen on engaging black soldiers in combat roles. “The issue centred on the servicemen’s ‘colour’, and indirectly on their African/slavery heritage.”³ As a result, the men of the BWIR were largely confined to support duties—digging trenches, building roads and gun emplacements, acting as stretcher-bearers, loading ships and trains, and working in ammunition dumps. Yet these were dangerous jobs, often carried out under enemy artillery and sniper fire. Of the over 10,000 that left Jamaica, 1000 never returned.⁴

After the Battle of the Somme in the second half of 1916, there was a shortage of manpower on the Western Front. In 1916, the first four BWIR battalions were stationed in Egypt. In September 1916, the 3rd Battalion sailed to Marseilles and, from there, were taken to the Western Front and attached to heavy artillery units. When they arrived, they were immediately shelled by German artillery.

The shelling was a reminder of the significant factor of war: that whether combatant or non-combatant, all troops faced the same dangers in the combat zone. The Battalion’s job was to start an ammunition dump and repair the roads, so that shells could be transported to the artillery in support of the front-line troops.

In the winter of 1916, the soldiers were moved to Boulogne where they worked in the docks loading and unloading ships. By early 1917, many of the soldiers had died from pneumonia, primarily brought on by their exposure to the cold. The Battalion was then moved south to the warmer climate of Marseilles. There the Battalion lost many soldiers, but this time from measles.

On 15 March 1917, the Battalion, before returning to the Front, but given the honour of being allowed to march through Marseilles after which they were given dinner by the French people. In April 1917, they were moved back to the combat zone.... From May 1917, they were stationed at Ypres where they supplied siege battalions at night. Under heavy shellfire, they cleared up battery positions and loaded ammunition.⁵

In July 1917, six soldiers from the BWIR were killed in an explosion in a dump, presumably an ammunition dump.⁶ Private Cooke was one of these. He died at No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station on 10 July 1917, with his five comrades and buried in Adinkerke Churchyard Extension (Grave Reference: 820).⁷ His sister, Mrs. D. Campbell of Dancans in Jamaica, was notified of his death.⁸

Adinkerke Churchyard Extension is in Adinkerke, near Veurne, Belgium. It is a Belgian Military Cemetery on the west side of the churchyard less than a kilometre from the Adinkerke Military Cemetery. Commonwealth troops held the Front from the Belgian coast inland for about 70 kilometres from June to November 1917. No. 1 CCCS was at Adinkerke for a short time in June. There are 67 Commonwealth graves from the Great War in the extension cemetery.⁹

The contributions of the BWIR were later recognized by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. In 1917 he said:

[Their] work has been very arduous and has been carried out almost continuously under shell-fire. In spite of casualties the men have always shown themselves willing and cheerful workers, and the assistance they have rendered has been much appreciated by the units to which they have been attached and for whom they have been working. The physique of the men is exceptional, their discipline excellent and their morale high.¹⁰

Private Cooke is remembered on the Caribbean online Roll of Honour.¹¹

© 2017 BIFHSGO

¹ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 11 May 2017), entry for Cooke, W H

² The history of the British West Indies Regiment draws extensively from John Siblon's book, *Caribbean Soldiers On the Western Front* (*Caribbean Soldiers On the Western Front*, John Siblon, African Heritage Forum, 2016. <https://www.academia.edu/>: accessed 1 May 2017)

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7

⁴ "Pieces of the Past," *Jamaica and the Great War* (<http://old.jamaica-gleaner.com/pages/history/story0014.html>: accessed 27 April 2017)

⁵ *Caribbean Soldiers On the Western Front*, pp. 23–24

⁶ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 20 April 2017), entry for Simmonds, D.; "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 20 April 2017), entry for Richards, V.; "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 20 April 2017), entry for Palmer, E. W. [*sic*]; "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 20 April 2017), entry for Cooke, W H; "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 11 May 2017), entry for Jones, H.; "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 11 May 2017), entry for Anderson, S.

⁷ *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 20 April 2017), entry for Cooke, W H Service No: 3463

⁸ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 11 May 2017), entry for Cooke, W H

⁹ "Adinkerke Churchyard Extension," CWGC <http://www.cwgc.org/>: accessed 18 April 2017

¹⁰ "The Story of the British West Indies Regiment in the First World War," Lisa Peatfield, *Imperial War Museum* (BWI Regiment in WWI IWM.docx: accessed 27 April 2017)

¹¹ *Caribbean Roll of Honour* (<http://caribbeanrollofhonour-ww1-ww2.yolasite.com/contents.php>: accessed 13 May 2017), entry for Cooke, W H